The Leftists' Attacks on Kennedy: Commentary on Oswald's Motives

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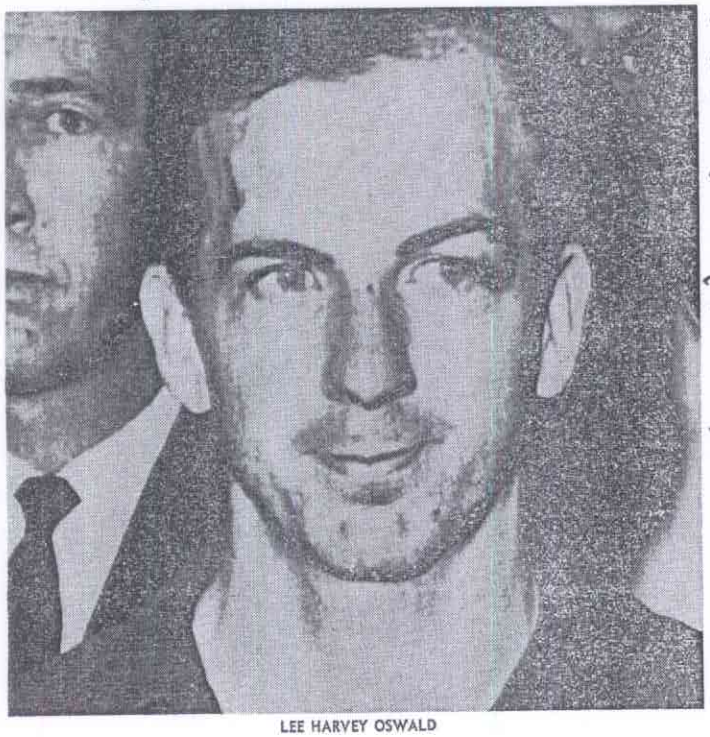
By REED J. IRVINE

The current investigation of an alleged conspiracy in New Orleans to plot the assassination of John F. Kennedy has added to the already widespread doubt and confusion in the minds of the public about who caused that terrible deed to be done and why. In spite of the overwhelming evidence that the killer was Lee Harvey Oswald and the conclusion of the Warren Commission backed by the FBI, that no one else was involved, doubts that it was he, and he alone, persist. Why?

The evidence that Oswald fired the fatal shots is generally well known and the efforts to discredit it have not been notably successful. The reluctance to accept it at face value appears to stem, in large measure, from the failure of the Warren Commission to provide a convincing motive for Oswald's action.

Obviously the motivation was important. This was not a murder committed on the spur of the moment by a mentally deranged man. Unlike most previous assassins or would-be assassins of Presidents, Oswald planned to avoid detection and to escape. After capture, he steadfastly refused to admit guilt. He was no madman, acting in a fit of passion with the intention of sacrificing himself. The Warren Commission suggested that Oswald's motivation lay in his maladjustment to his environment, his hatred for American society, his desire to be a great man, and his commitment to Communism. No attempt was made to spell out how any of these factors could have explained his decision to kill the President nor the way in which he behaved subsequently. There are a great many maladjusted people in the world, but very few of them become assassins. Oswald's planning of the crime and his denial of guilt undermines the theory that he was seeking notoriety to satisfy his craving for "greatness." His hatred of American society and his commitment to Communism were related to each other but the Commission failed to show how they might be related to the assassination.



LEE HARVEY OSWALD

Oswald's Motive

If Oswald had been a right-wing fanatic, there would have been no difficulty in agreeing upon his motive. The crime would have been put down as a political act incited by the climate of hate that prevailed in Dallas. Indeed, there has been some effort, most recently in William Manchester's "The Death of a President," to somehow associate the right-wing's animosity toward Kennedy with the assassination, even though it was a left-winger who pulled the trigger.

Arthur Krock posed the bothersome question that cried out for an answer:

Why did the man who first attempted to kill General Walker, a passionate advocate of the far right in political philosophy, choose for his next target President Kennedy, an advocate of a political philosophy somewhat to the left of center?

The absence of a satisfactory answer to that very obvious question underlies much of the reluctance to fully accept the Warren Commission's conclusions.

However, there is a perfectly logical answer, one that makes Oswald's behavior understandable and credible as a political act inspired by hatred.

What has been generally overlooked is that John F. Kennedy was the object of bitter attack from the extreme left, as well as from the extreme right. The common assumption that anyone so disliked by the right must have been a hero to the left was completely false.

Attacks on Kennedy

Oswald subscribed to a Communist publication called "The Militant" which, in the weeks preceding the assassination, was spewing forth its hatred of John F. Kennedy. For example, the issue of October 7, which was found among Oswald's possessions, carried two vicious attacks on the President. He was caricatured as a "determined partner" of Mississippi's Senator Eastland. It was charged that Kennedy was clinging to the Dixiecrats and that everything he did was done "in order to subordinate the whole to the interests of the ruling capitalist clique."

The following week, "The Militant" published an inflamatory speech by Oswald's hero, Fidel Castro. Castro followed the party line in denouncing Kennedy as a demagogue who was not sincere in his support of civil rights. Castro fulminated, "His business is to win votes, while the brutal acts of murder and terrorism continue." He went on to accuse the United States of trying to strangle Cuba and declared, "We cannot consider ourselves at peace with the imperialists," that is, the U.S. led by John F. Kennedy.

In a passage in this same speech that might well have been suggestive to expert rifleman Oswald, Castro said:

"We must know what our duties are in the struggle against the counter-revolutionary offensive of imperialism and in the struggle for the economy. With the rifle and the work-tool, the work-tool and the rifle, with these both we must bring about our victory . . ."

This is a sample of the intellectual poison that Oswald absorbed week after week. Kennedy was portrayed as a demagogue who was using civil rights to deprive the Left of its chance to develop the discontented Negroes into a revolutionary force. He had caused Castro's humiliation in the missile crisis, and he was accused of continuing to plot the overthrow of the communists in Cuba. He was supporting the Diem regime in Vietnam, frustrating the communist efforts to take over that country.

Expected Results

Hatred inspired by these attacks on the President must have played an important part in Oswald's decision. But he did not give the appearance of one who acted from passion. If he calculated the consequences in political terms, how did he think that with his rifle he could help advance the Marxist cause?

We can only speculate, but with Kennedy gone, Lyndon Johnson would succeed to the presidency. Oswald probably expected Johnson to turn his back on the drive for civil rights legislation. If he did, the opportunities for the communists to win Negro support would be greatly enhanced.

It is also probable that Oswald thought he could handle the assassination in a way that would deliver a mortal blow to the right wingers in Dallas and perhaps throughout the country. He correctly judged that strong suspicion would fall on the rightists, if only the real killer could escape and cover his tracks. If his evident assumption that he could escape detection by firing from the sixth floor of the Book Depository had proven correct, Oswald might well have been able to conceal or destroy much of the evidence that incriminated him. The doubts that have been generated about his guilt would have been nothing compared to the smoke screen that would have been raised had he been able to dispose of the murder weapon and had he not killed Officer Tippit.

In the event, the initial general assumption that the radical right was behind the assassination would have persisted, perhaps generating enough hostility to destroy the rightists as a political force. Oswald probably hoped that this would be one of the results of his action. He had shown his deep hatred of the right wingers by his attempt to kill Gen. Edwin A. Walker in April 1963. If by killing Kennedy he could also destroy Walker and his supporters politically, he could more than make up for his April failure.

Distorted Mind

To be sure, this is only speculation. Since he did not confess, Oswald's motives can only be reduced. One must begin with the fact that his mind was saturated with the distorted and bitter portrayal of President Kennedy in the communist papers that he read. There was nothing to inhibit him from committing murder to achieve the political results he wanted. This was shown by his attempt on the life of Walker and that fact that he once contemplated trying to kill Richard Nixon.

"With the rifle . . . we must bring about our victory." These words from the lips of Castro could only have strengthened his resolve to use his rifle to destroy the enemies of Castro and Communism. To Lee Harvey Oswald the assassination of John F. Kennedy was a way of "fulfilling his duties toward his country and the world."

This may seem incredible to the normal mind, but Oswald's mind was not normal. It was a mind that accepted as truth the queer and twisted picture of the world that he found each week in "The Militant."